

Date: 9/12/18

To: The NJ State Board of Education

Topic: Gifted Education – Parent Viewpoint

Hello, my name is Amanda LeeMasci and I'm the mother of three little boys, ages 3, 5, 7, all currently enrolled in the Cherry Hill School District. Today I want to tell you about my middle son. My middle son is what we now call twice exceptional. He struggles with picking up on social cues, he goes in circles on certain topics and he can't handle it when he doesn't get his way. But, at now 5, he can tell you all about chess strategy and can check mate a novice in a few moves. When he was 4, he would want to tell you every state capital (in alphabetical order) and knew all three hundred of his older brother's sight words. At 3, Mace could tell you about the exoplanets, moons, galaxies and stars. He's the one that taught me that our solar system actually orbits about a black hole, Sagittarius A. At 2 he could read better than his older brother and had memorized my phone number, even though I wasn't really teaching it to him.

While these all seem like really positive things, and they are, it also makes it clear that my child thinks differently than most of his peers. When I enrolled him in the district's early childhood development school, he didn't want to play like the other kids. When I requested that he be tested, I found out that his IQ is in the 99.7th percentile. The Child Study Team also told me that, even though he showed social/emotional delays, he didn't qualify for help in the classroom with his outbursts and inflexibility because he didn't show a "learning delay". Apparently there are supports only for the significantly delayed but not for kids that are gifted and who also have additional social and emotional needs. Because my son had surpassed the learning level of his peers, he was stuck bored and unruly while other children, with similar issues, can get help. On top of that, because he didn't have a plan with goals, I would get mixed reports from the teacher. I would hear that my kid "had a good day", which implied that there were many not-so-good days. It wasn't until spring that the teacher asked about behavior therapy that I had told her we were waiting for insurance to approve. She told me that he really needed it and then she clammed up. I think she was worried that I would petition the school for support again.

This year my son is in Kindergarten. The elementary school that he's enrolled in now has been willing to meet with me and my husband. We had the opportunity to tell them about our son and our concerns. And the elementary school listened. They even suggested a project-based approach to let him explore some advanced teachings and they decided to initiate Intervention and Referral Services. The experience was completely different than that of the early childhood school and we are in the same school district, only a few miles away.

As a parent with an atypical child, I have not only the day-to-day struggle of helping my young child figure out how to navigate this world but I also have had to learn on the fly what my rights are and what programs are or are not in place. Through this process, I've discovered that the district doesn't have a gifted program until grade 3. If the elementary school approached my child the same way the Early Childhood Development Center did, I doubt we would have had any real plan in place and no open line of communication.

If in one district, I have personally experienced these discrepancies, what is happening within the rest of the state? Parents and educators need guidance. We need consistency. We need an office of gifted education at the department of education.